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The Problem of Declining Enrollment in the Elementary Schools of Harding County

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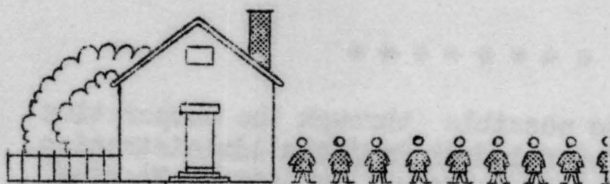
Kumlien, W. F.; Sauer, Howard M.; and Scandrette, C., "The Problem of Declining Enrollment in the Elementary Schools of Harding County" (1942). *Agricultural Experiment Station Rural Sociology Pamphlets*. 80.
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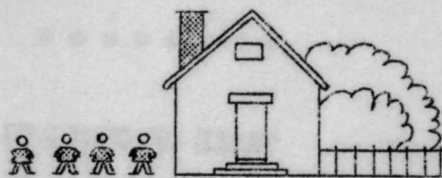
April, 1942

THE PROBLEM OF DECLINING ENROLLMENT
in
The Elementary Schools
of
Harding County

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Howard M. Sauer
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In 1920, 832 pupils were enrolled in the rural schools of Harding county



but in 1940 the total enrollment was only 376

Each figure represents 100 pupils

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EXPLANATORY NOTE

During recent years, enrollments in most South Dakota elementary schools have declined at a very rapid rate. The prevailing type of rural school district organization in most counties has proved rather ineffective in coping with dwindling enrollments and with the consequent high costs per pupil.

It is the purpose of this pamphlet to assist educators, school board members and other Harding county leaders, by analyzing the nature of the problem and by presenting suggestions for its solution; as they have grown out of the experiences of other South Dakota communities.

* * * * *

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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This study was made possible through the cooperation of the State and Federal Work Projects Administration and the South Dakota Agricultural Experiment Station. The project is officially designated as W. P. A. Project No. 265-1-74-57. The authors gratefully acknowledge the cooperation of Mr. L.C. Woodward, the Harding County Superintendent of Schools, from whose office most of the data used in this study were secured; and of high school superintendents who supplied lists of their tuition students.

* * * * *

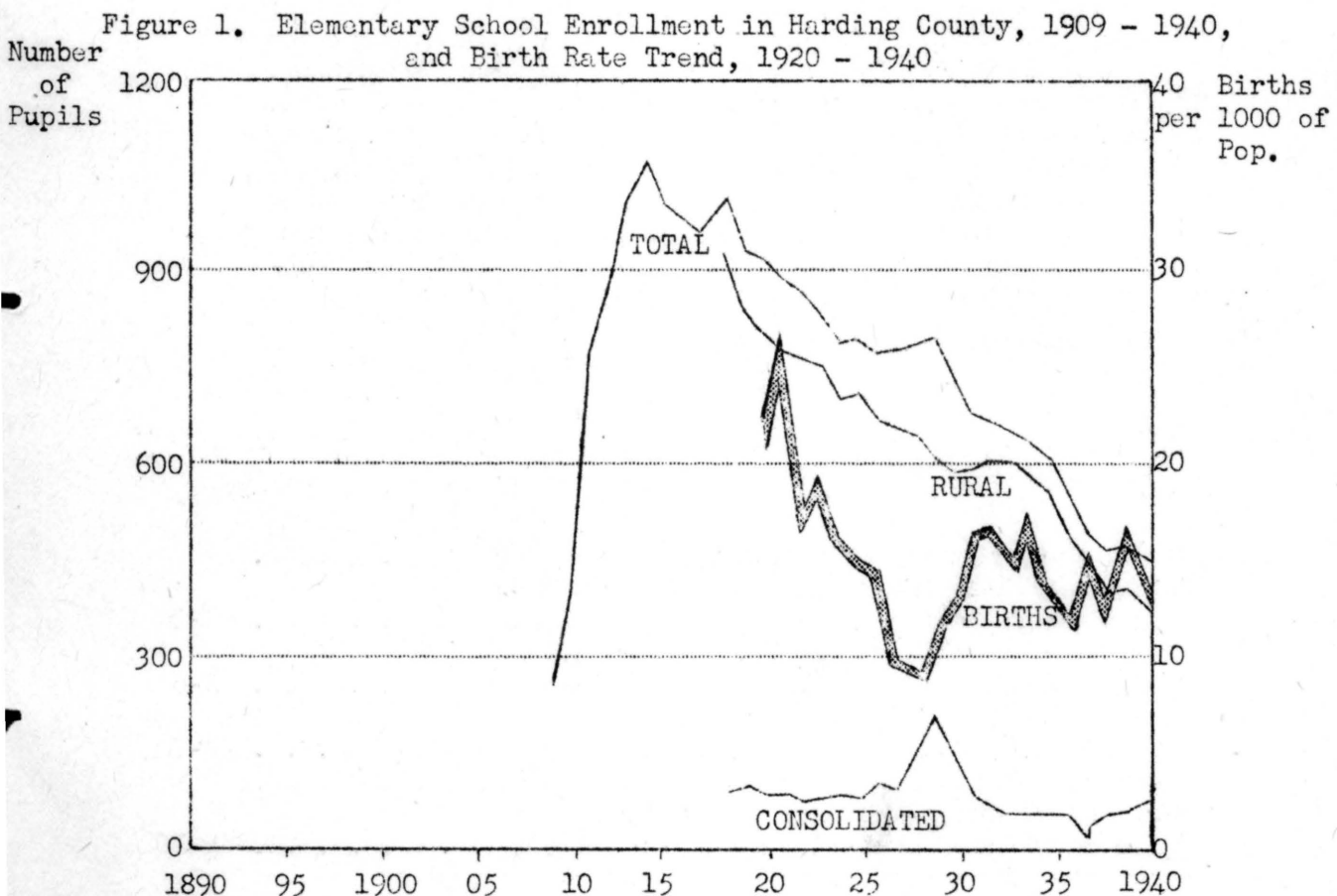
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The Problem of Declining Enrollments in the Elementary Schools of Harding County

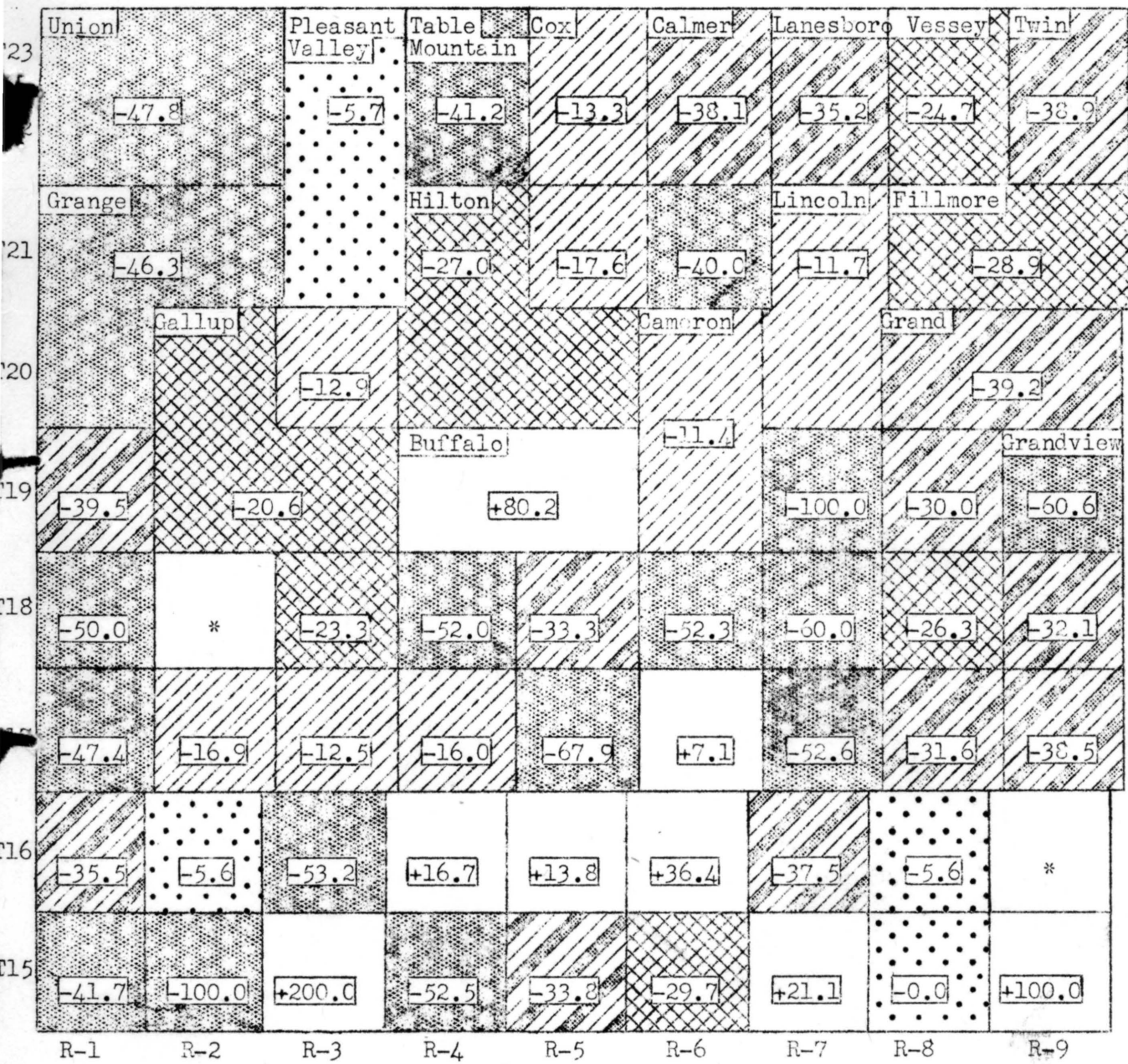
Population experts have been predicting for a number of years that the downward trend of the birth rate would eventually cause a serious decline in the elementary enrollment. This prediction has been in the process of fulfillment in Harding county since 1914 (Figure 1). Between 1909* and 1914 the total enrollment for Harding county increased rapidly from 255 pupils to 1,073 pupils, the county's peak enrollment. From 1914 the enrollment declined steadily, except for two periods of slight increase, until it reached 453 pupils in 1940, less than half of the 1909 enrollment. The enrollment of rural schools has decreased from the 1918 high of 924 pupils to the 1940 low of 376 pupils. Consolidated schools suffered a sharp decrease in enrollments between 1929 and 1940. Independent schools show an increase in enrollments since their organization in 1937.

The trend of the Harding county birth rate is also shown in Figure 1. It will be noted that the birth rate shows a sharp decrease, roughly corresponding to the decline in enrollment. From 26.4 births per 1000 of the population in 1921 the birth rate dropped to the 1928 low of 9.3 births per 1000 of the population. The rate increased to 16.6 births per 1000 of the population in 1932. The rates varied in the following years, but the trend has been downward; the average birth rate for the period 1935-40 being 14.2 births per 1000 of the population. The result of the downward tendency in the birth rate has been a steady decline in the number of children who arrive at school age.



Source: Biennial Reports of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction and Reports of the State Board of Health
* Harding county was organized in 1909.

Figure 2. Population Gains and Losses in Harding County, 1930 - 1940



Legend: Gained Lost 20.0 - 29.9%
 Lost 0.0 - 9.9% Lost 30.0 - 39.9%
 Lost 10.0 - 19.9% Lost 40.0% or more

Source: Sixteenth U. S. Census, 1940 * Data Incomplete

Another important factor in the elementary enrollment decline is shown in Figure 2, which records the loss of population through outward migration. Between 1930 and 1940 the population loss of Harding county was 16.1 percent. Figure 2 shows the gains and losses by townships during this period and indicates that losses have been quite general throughout the county except for the southeastern part where some gains are indicated in several townships. Buffalo, the county seat, an unincorporated town, situated in Buffalo township accounted for the 80.2 percent gain in population there. Throughout the remaining townships losses ranged from 5.6 to 100 percent with seventeen townships showing losses of 40 percent or more. The direct relation between population decrease and enrollment decline is indicated by the fact that, usually, the township which has the greatest loss in population, (Figures 2 and 3) has the greatest percent of decline in elementary school enrollment.

Figure 3. Elementary School Enrollments in Harding County 1930 and 1940

(9) 16 2	(3) 17 5	(2) 17 11	(8) 10 7	(7) 20 19	(6) 20 9	Vessey Cons. 17 11	(16) 37 22
(17) 10 --	(10) -- --		(27)	(19) -- --	(25) 11 11	(34) 16 14	(5) 17 9
(12) 20 2	(11) 7 5	(31) 6 2	30 13	(18) 18 12		(15) 6 6	(26) 13 10
Camp Crook Ind. 97 66	(24) -- 5	(14)	153* 109*		(35)		(21) 22 5
(13) 10 3	(22) 7 3				-- --	(4) 29 19	(20) 22 11
(1) 25 17		(33) 5 6	(28) -- 4	36 20		(23) 13 --	
		(30) 14 --	(32) 32 16				

Legend: Top figure 1930 enrollment Lower figure 1940 enrollment

* Includes city of Buffalo which is neither Independent nor Consolidated

Source: Records of Harding County Superintendent of Schools

In 1940, 37 schools were being operated in 35 common school districts of Harding county in addition to the independent district of Camp Crook and the consolidated district of Vessey.

The downward trend in elementary enrollments is shown in Figure 3, which lists the enrollments of each district for 1930 and 1940.

Of the 35 school districts of Harding county 24 dropped in enrollments between 1930 and 1940. No schools were in operation in eight districts. However, in two of these districts mothers were instructing the children at home, with credit being given the children for grades completed. Fifteen schools were in operation with five or fewer pupils enrolled; fifteen with from six to ten pupils; eight enrolled from 11 to 15 pupils, while only one, namely the school in the town of Buffalo, had more than 16 pupils enrolled. The total rural enrollment had dropped from 832 pupils in 1920 to 376 pupils in 1940. Further enrollment losses may be expected in the future unless unforeseen population changes occur.

Figure 4. Cost Per Pupil by Size of Enrollment in the Schools of Harding County, 1940

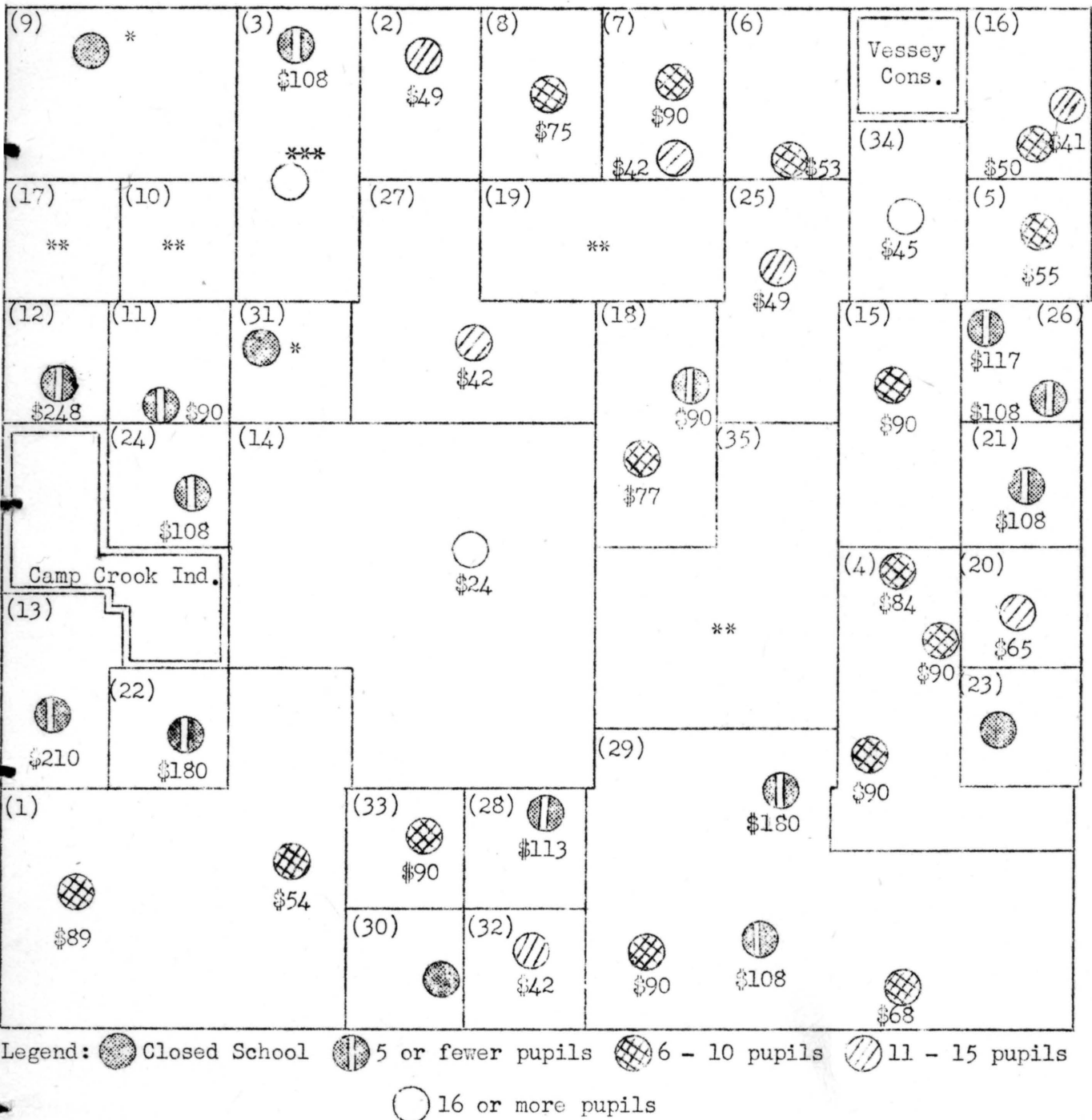


Figure below circle represents cost per pupil

Figure in () indicates district number

** Buildings locations not given

* Pupils in this District are taught at home by their mothers no salary paid, but some means of paying for the work is arranged.

*** Enrollment not given for this open school

Source: Records of Harding County Superintendent of Schools.

As Figure 4 indicates, the cost per pupil in the schools of Harding county vary widely. Schools with the smallest enrollment show the greatest per pupil cost. In 1940 the cost of operating the common schools of Harding county ranged from \$24 in District 14 which enrolled 109 pupils to \$248 per pupil in District 12 with only two pupils enrolled.

Table 1 (below) indicates that the operation of schools for less than ten pupils is excessively expensive on a cost-per-pupil basis. Schools with five or fewer pupils graphically illustrate this point. The average cost per pupil for the schools in this group was \$115.92 as compared to the \$58.51 average for all schools.

Table 1. Instructional Cost* Per Pupil For Operating Schools Of Various Sizes in Harding County, 1940

Size of School	Number of Schools	Number of Pupils	Total Cost	Average Cost Per Pupil
Total	60	376	\$22,008.00	\$58.51
Closed Schools	21	---	--	--
5 or fewer pupils	15	59	6,840.00***	115.92
6 - 10 pupils	15	110	8,058.00	73.25
11 - 15 pupils	8	98	4,545.00	46.37
16 or more pupils	1**	109	2,565.00	23.53

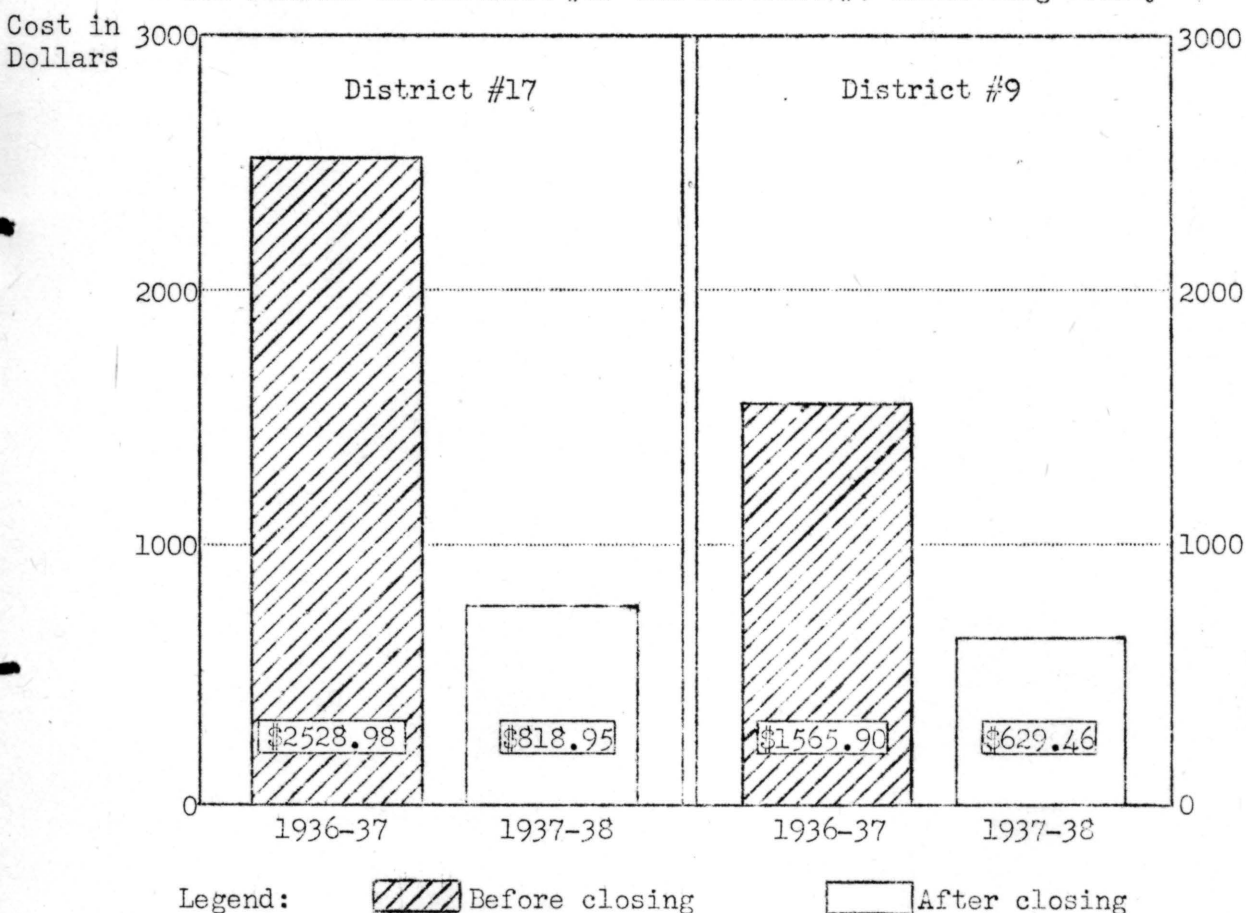
* Based on teachers' salaries only

** Town of Buffalo - Common School

*** Two schools with no salary paid out, mothers taught their own children at home

Source: Records of the Harding County Superintendent of Schools

Figure 5. Cost of Maintaining Educational Facilities Before and After Closing The Schools in District #17 and District #9 in Harding County



Source: Records of Harding County Superintendent of Schools

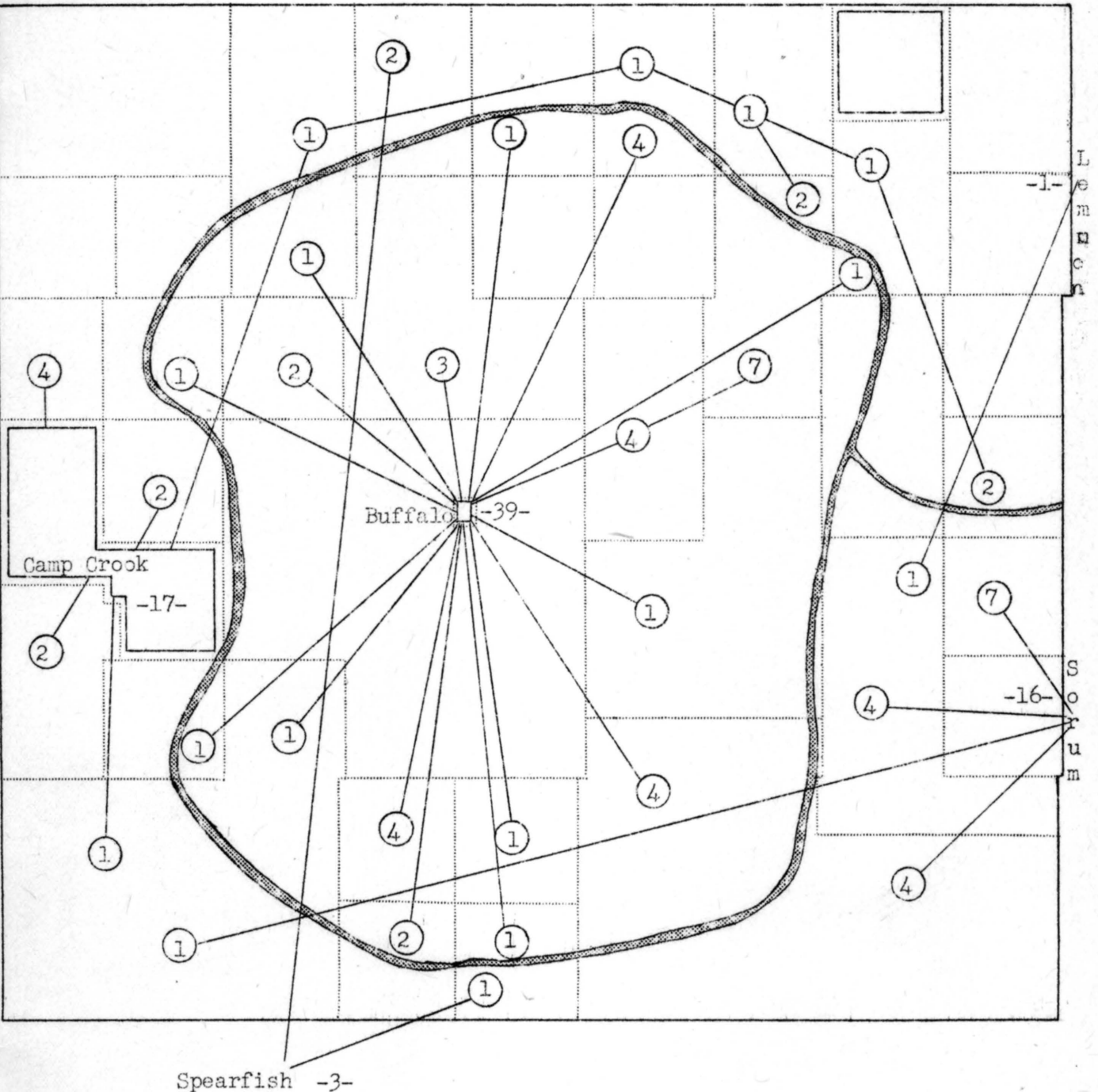
To reduce high per pupil costs school districts throughout South Dakota have closed a large number of schools during recent years, particularly those with diminishing enrollments.

During the 1936-37 school term school operation costs for District 17 totaled \$2,528.98. The following year the school was closed and the pupils were sent to another district with the home district paying their tuition and transportation. That year the cost of educating pupils of the district, including the tuition and transportation payments, was \$818.95, a saving of \$1,710.02. A similar though smaller saving was made in district 9. During the 1936-37 school term operating costs for this school were \$1,565.90. The following year when the school was closed and the pupils were sent to another district the expense of educating the pupils of the district dropped to \$629.46.

Since the cost per pupil increases and the educational efficiency decreases,* as the number of pupils attending school declines, it seems practical both from the standpoint of economy and educational efficiency to close a school when the enrollment drops to five or fewer pupils.

* It is common knowledge among teachers that where there are only one or two pupils to a grade it is usually difficult to get students interested.

Figure 6. Areas From Which High Schools Drew Their Harding County Tuition Pupils, 1940



Legend:

-0- Number of tuition students in attendance

○ Number of tuition students from each district

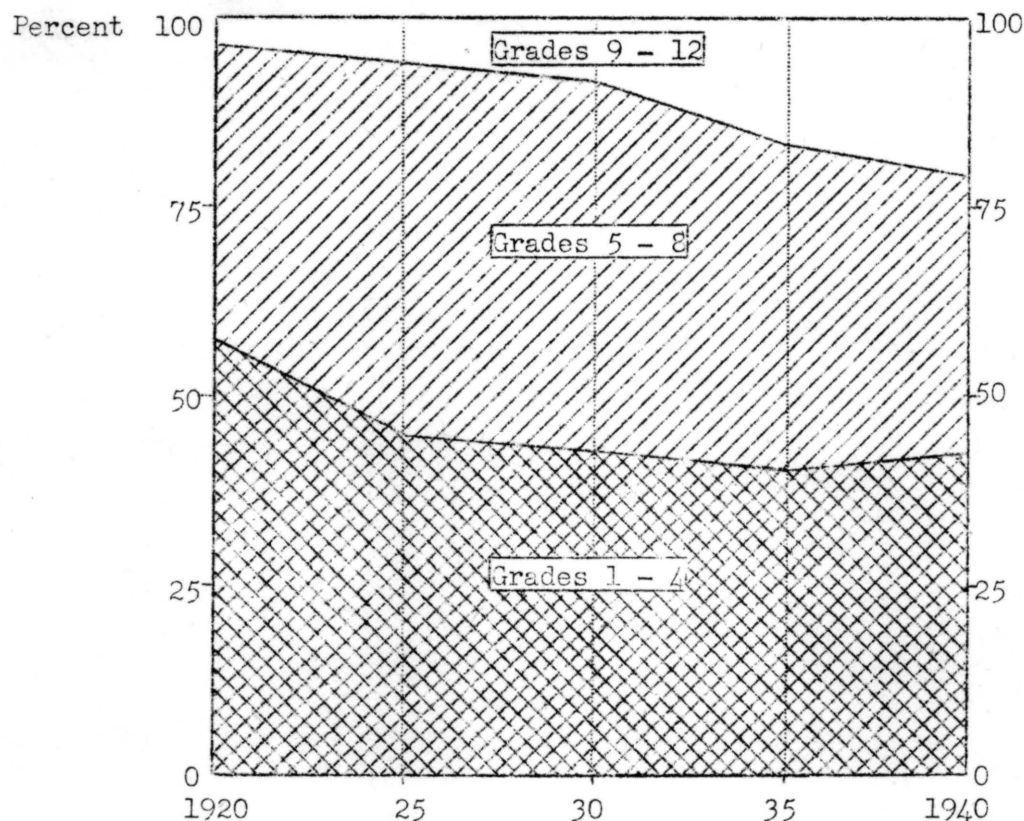
Source: Records of Harding County High School Superintendents

Since 1921, school districts of South Dakota lacking high schools of their own have been required by law to pay tuition costs for their students who attend high school outside the district. Figure 6 shows the areas from which high schools drew their Harding county tuition students, numbering approximately 76 in 1940. Twenty of these students attended high schools outside the county, 16 going to Sorum, three to Spearfish and one to Lemmon.

Realizing that the cost of operating their own secondary schools would be prohibitive, district school boards of Harding county have adopted the policy of sending their students to high schools already existing in town and village centers. In many counties which have a number of independent districts at strategic points throughout the county, the adoption of a similar plan for elementary education seems practicable. Rural schools could be closed and the remaining pupils sent to village schools, with the home district paying the tuition and transportation costs. Where distance and lack of good roads make this course impractical the centralized school might be a solution. These plans would have the advantage of economy and of extending to farm children the educational facilities of town schools or of larger rural schools.

However, until the time that concentration of educational services in town centers becomes more general, districts may well continue their policy of closing those schools in which enrollments fall below a minimum and of sending their pupils to the nearest rural school still operating.

Figure 7. Percentage Distribution of Elementary and Secondary Enrollments, By Grade Groups, in Harding County, 1920 - 1940



Source: Biennial Reports of State Superintendent of Public Instruction

Between 1920 and 1940 the proportion enrolled in the first four elementary grades of Harding county shrank from 57.3 to 42.2 percent of the total elementary and secondary enrollment. The explanation of this trend may be found in the fact that birth rates have fallen since 1920. Consequently there have been fewer and fewer pupils each year to enter the first grade. Twenty-two and three-tenths percent of those enrolled in school in 1920 were first graders and nineteen and four-tenths percent were eighth graders, whereas in 1940 there was an equal number of first graders and eighth graders, but the proportion for each had shrunk to 8.8 percent. With the greatly reduced number of persons under six years of age, it is obvious that elementary enrollments will continue to decline for a number of years even if the birth rate trend should be reversed.

Figure 7 also shows that the high school enrollment was more than six times as large in 1940 as in 1920, increasing from 3.2 percent to 20.6 percent. This trend may be explained by the fact that an increasingly greater proportion of eighth grade graduates are continuing their education in high school.

Table 2. Percentage Distribution of Elementary and Secondary Enrollment by Grades, 1920 - 1940

Year	Grade											
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1920	22.3	11.8	10.9	12.3	9.1	10.9	---	19.4	2.1	.4	.5	.1
1925	13.0	12.9	8.9	10.1	12.1	13.5	12.5	11.0	3.1	1.3	.9	.9
1930	9.0	10.0	11.3	12.2	11.8	12.5	14.6	10.4	2.6	2.4	2.1	1.1
1935	9.7	8.9	9.9	11.6	9.1	7.9	12.4	14.3	6.0	3.9	3.6	2.5
1940	8.8	12.0	12.1	9.3	7.6	11.1	9.7	8.8	6.9	5.4	4.4	3.9

Source: Biennial Reports of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, 1920, 1925, 1930, 1935 and 1940.

